

Understanding Religion (REL 103)

Instructor: W. Ezekiel Goggin

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Class Meetings: Ladd 207; Mon 12:20-1:15PM; Wed/Fri 12:20-1:40PM

Office hours: Thurs 1:30-4:30

Course Description

According to sociologist Peter Berger, the idea that religion is gradually disappearing from the modern world is a mistaken one. “Modernity is not necessarily secularizing; it is necessarily *pluralizing*. Modernity is characterized by an increasing plurality, within the same society, of different beliefs, values, and worldviews. Plurality does indeed pose a challenge to all religious traditions –each one must cope with the fact that there are ‘all these others,’ not in a faraway country, but just next door” (Berger, 2008). For the religious and non-religious alike, this phenomenon of “pluralization” is one we ignore at our peril. This course will prepare students to grapple with this phenomenon in three ways: first, by developing familiarity with some important perspectives and problems in the academic study of religion and, secondly, by facilitating basic literacy with respect to a range of historical traditions. In doing so, we will explore the mythological, ritual, and philosophical continuities and discontinuities both within and between traditions.

Objectives

In pursuit of these themes, students will achieve five major objectives:

1. Become familiar with several important theoretical perspectives in the academic study of religion.
2. Critically apply these perspectives through the careful study of several distinctive traditions
3. Take part in the presentation of collaborative research on representations of religion in contemporary media
4. Develop and refine their own working-definition of “religion” over the course of the semester

Required Texts

The Future of An Illusion, Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey (W. W. Norton Co, 1989)

The Myth of the Eternal Return, Mircea Eliade, trans. Willard Trask (Mythos, 1991)

The Bhagavad Gita, trans. by Barbara Stoler Miller (Bantam Classic, 1986)

The New Annotated Oxford Study Bible (NRSV) with the Apocrypha ed. Michael Coogan, et al, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018)

Cults and New Religions: A Brief History, Douglas E. Cowan and David G. Bromley 2nd Edition (Chichester: Wiley & Sons, 2015)

NB: Other required texts will be distributed electronically as PDFs, hyperlink and/or as a handout

Assignments & Evaluation

1.) Syllabus Scavenger Hunt (10 points)

2.) Individual Writing Assignments (60 points total)

- i. **Defining Religion (25 points):** Students will turn in a short reflection paper in which they articulate their own carefully considered definition of “religion.” This is not intended to be a *personal* definition (e.g., “what ‘religion means to me...’) but, rather, an attempt on the part of students to define religion as an object of academic study. Successful papers will be 500-750 words in length and will situate the definition of religion alongside the methodological issues explored in our initial course readings.
- ii. **Re-defining Religion (35 points):** Toward the end of the semester, students will revisit their definitions through a second short reflection paper. Successful papers will identify at least three insights, problems, or data which have led them to re-affirm, reject, or otherwise revise their initial definition. Papers should be 750-1000 pages long.

3.) Midterm and Final Examinations: (150 points each; 300 points total)

Examinations will be administered according to the course schedule (below). Examinations will be non-cumulative, mixed format written tests consisting of multiple choice, short answer, and choice of essay. The instructor reserves the right to alter the format of the examination, and will offer students advanced notice in such situations.

4.) Group Research Project (100 points)

As religious pluralization increases in visibility and intensity, so must our ability to critically approach the information we are given about religions. The group research project is a chance for students to display sophisticated, critical engagement with representations of a contemporary or historical religion by analyzing the implicit theoretical perspectives at work in them. Who is representing this religion? An insider? A former member? An outsider? What are their motivations? What theory of religion is assumed in their representation, and how does this shape their selection and presentation of the data? Students will be divided into several small groups to conduct a group research project on a representation of a religious tradition in some form of cultural document or artifact (including but by no means limited to: news media, music, films, poetry, novels, or visual art).

Students will work on these presentations intermittently over the course of the term. Grades for group presentations will consist of an assessment of three separate activities:

1. PROSPECTUS: The presentation of the group’s selected subject-matter, its relevance to the theoretical approaches to religion explored in the course, and a very basic outline of the

questions which the final group presentation will address. We will hold a presentation prospectus colloquium prior to midterms in which each group will offer an informal presentation of their subject matter and basic research plan to the class and field questions and discuss suggestions from their peers (more details to come when groups are assigned; this will be a part of your final presentation grade)

2. **TASK-CHART:** Submission of a task chart (to be distributed when groups are selected) which records the specific research and preparatory contributions of each member of the group, and the dates on which these occurred.
3. **GROUP PRESENTATION:** During the final week of the term, each group will make a presentation of their analyses to the rest of the class. Successful presentations will do the following:
 1. Be about 20 minutes in length
 2. Offer a general description of the representation being analyzed (e.g., general information about the relevant representation, its form, content, history, etc.)
 3. Analyze details of this representation of religion in terms of our theoretical readings: What is the theory of religion at work “behind the scenes” of this representation? How does it specifically shape this representation, and how might this relate to the interests of the producer of this representation? Does the implicit theory bear similarities to the Freudian, Marxian, Eliadean, or Geertzian perspectives we looked at in class?
 4. Explain any notable controversy, debate, or other public discussion that this representation of religion/religiosity has generated.

Late paper policy:

I am aware that this is not your only course, that you have commitments and lives outside the classroom, and that unforeseen events can throw a wrench in even one’s best laid plans. With that in mind, every paper deadline has a 24-hour “grace” period after during which you may turn in your paper with no penalty. After that, I will deduct 1/3 of a grade for each day that paper is not turned in. For instance, a B+ would become a B, a B- would become a C+, etc., for each 24 hour interval before the paper is turned in beyond the grace period.

Class Participation (30 points) Attendance, punctuality, preparation, and participation will all contribute to the class participation grade:

- 1.) Attendance: **All students are required to attend every class meeting**, and students who incur unexcused absences will receive zero participation points for the day.
- 2.) Punctuality: **Tardiness will be recorded by the instructor and habitual tardiness will result in a professor-student conference to understand the root of the problem.** Depending on the circumstances, this may result in a loss of points.
- 3.) Preparation: **Students are expected to prepare for each class by completing all the assignments for that day and bringing the relevant readings/materials with them to class meetings.** If you are not prepared for class you are not only doing yourself a disservice, but also your peers –lack of preparation precludes effective participation in class, thus diminishing our capacity to learn. We are all in this together!

- 4.) Participation: **Students should engage the material and join in class discussions of the reading assignments.** Students are expected to be respectful, charitable, and rigorous in their exposition of argument and in their reception of the arguments made by their peers. **Failure to respectfully and thoughtfully engage in discussion will result in a loss of participation points.** Cell phones and computers must be silenced or turned off and stowed away prior to class, and should remain so during the entirety of class time. Please refrain from any texting, snapchatting, tweeting, and other forms of digitally broadcasting/consuming information during class time, please. In the case that you have an institutionally documented reason for using technology in class, contact the instructor **immediately** to facilitate your full participation with a minimum of distractions

Grading Policy

Grades for the course will follow the point scale and breakdown below:

Point Scale

500-491 = +A
490-465 = A
464-455 = -A
454-445 = +B
444-420 = B
419-410 = -B
409-400 = +C
399-350 = C
349-330 = -C
329-300 = D
299 & below = F

NB: Grades are an assessment of the students' efforts and abilities. Only exceptionally sophisticated work will receive an 'A,' Good work will receive a 'B.' Satisfactory work warrants a 'C'. Unsatisfactory work will receive a 'D.' Work which does not meet the basic course requirements will receive an 'F.' I have clearly laid out the points scale so that you may easily keep track of your progress through the course. While I stand by the marks I assign, you are welcome to discuss any grade with me (e.g., why you received it, what you could have done differently), though please be advised that chances are slim that your mark will change, unless I have made a glaring error in assessment (in which case please bring it to my attention!).

In addition to being informative, this course is intended to be challenging. Students are encouraged to approach the instructor with any questions, problems, difficulties that they may face with respect to course materials. I promise to make myself available to discuss any issues you may have and to help you get the most you can from the course!

Plagiarism

No plagiarism of any kind is acceptable in this class (or any other, for that matter). **Any occurrence of plagiarism will result in an automatic grade of zero for the assignment and immediate referral to the University administration, who may recommend disciplinary action.** Students should consult the Academic Integrity Handbook for a full explanation of College expectations and policy.

https://www.skidmore.edu/advising/documents/AcademicIntegrityHandbook_Web.pdf

Any material, from any source, must be cited according to standard citation procedures. This includes books, magazines, periodicals, newspapers, television, internet, lectures and even personal conversations. *Papers may be submitted to Turnitin.com.* If you are unsure of how to properly cite materials, check out: <https://www.library.ucsb.edu/help/citing-sources>

Writing Center and Academic Support

The development of clear, communicative, and effective writing skills is essential to a liberal arts education. Students who may be struggling with any phase of the writing process (drafting, research, editing, etc.) are strongly encouraged to avail themselves of the academic support resources provided by the college's Writing Center. The Writing Center also offers specialized support for English language learners and academic coaching and counseling services to help students develop skills necessary for academic success (e.g., time-management, organization skills, etc.). Consultations are available by appointment through the Writing Center's website:

<https://www.skidmore.edu/writingcenter/>

Accessibility

Skidmore is committed to an inclusive, equitable, and accessible learning community. Students who require special accommodations for should contact Meg Hegener (mhegener@skidmore.edu) at the Office of Students Access Services at the beginning of the term in order to facilitate their full participation in course activities and full access to course materials.

Further information can be found at the Office of Student Access Services' website:

<https://www.skidmore.edu/accessibility/>

Title IX Statement

Skidmore's Title IX statement as approved by the Student Government Association and endorsed by the Curriculum Committee is as follows: "Skidmore College considers sexual and gender-based misconduct to be one of the most serious violations of the values and standards of the College. Unwelcome sexual contact of any form is a violation of students' personal integrity and their right to a safe environment and therefore violates Skidmore's values. Sexual and gender-based misconduct is also prohibited by federal regulations. Skidmore College faculty are committed to supporting our students and upholding gender equity laws as outlined by Title IX. If a student chooses to confide in a member of Skidmore's faculty or staff regarding an issue of sexual or gender-based misconduct, that faculty or staff member is obligated to tell Skidmore's Title IX Coordinator or Title IX Deputy Coordinator. The Title IX Coordinator or Deputy Coordinator will assist the student in connecting with all possible resources for support and reporting both on and off campus. Identities and details will be shared only with those who need to know to support the student and to address the situation through the college's processes. If the student wishes to confide in a confidential resource, The Counseling Center Staff, Health Services, and Victim Advocates are all options available."

Course Schedule

Week 1

9/4: “That’s Fine in Practice, But Does it Work in Theory?”

Discussion: “Big Questions” in Religious Studies

9/6: “History and Critical Perspectives on Religious Studies”

Assignment Due: Syllabus Scavenger Hunt (10 points, due by hardcopy at the beginning of class)

Required reading:

“Secularization Falsified” – Peter Berger

<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/02/secularization-falsified>

Week 2

9/9: “The Practical Stakes of Theoretical Questions”

Discussion: Why the “Big Questions” in Religious Studies Matter

-In-class video: “The Sunday Assembly: ‘A Church With No Religion’ ” (BBC Scotland: <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-scotland-44811343/the-sunday-assembly-a-church-with-no-religion>)

-In-class video: “Ten Commandments Ordered From Courthouse” (WPTN News, West Palm Beach Florida: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c_D61iHpiY)

9/11:

***Assignment Due: Individual Writing Assignment 1 “Defining Religion.”**

Required Reading:

“Religion as Opium of the People: Karl Marx's View on Religion and Economics”

<https://www.learnreligions.com/religion-as-opium-of-the-people-250555>

“Theses on Feuerbach” –Karl Marx (PDF/Handout)

9/13: “The Ambivalence of Opium: Religion and Marxist Political Economy”

Required Reading:

“A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction”—Karl Marx (PDF/Handout)

“A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy” (PDF/Handout)

Week 3

9/16:

Required Reading:

“Feminist Social Critique and Marx’s Theory of Religion” – Amy Newman (PDF)
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3810420.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ac1bc0e1d9b70446674dd3f411b0fb743>

9/18: “The Doctor Will See You Now: Freudian Psychoanalysis, Religion, and Neurosis”

Required Reading:

“Sigmund Freud’s Theories About Religion”
<https://www.verywellmind.com/freud-religion-2795858>

Religion and Obsessional Neuroses (PDF)

9/20: “Is a Dream a Lie if it Don’t Come True (Or is it Something Worse?): Freud on Illusions”

Required Reading:

The Future of An Illusion – Sigmund Freud (Chapters I-III, pp. 5-25, Chapter V, pp. 31-37)

Week 4

9/23: “Feeling Disillusioned: Freud’s Secularizing Program”

Required Reading:

The Future of an Illusion – Sigmund Freud (Chapters VI-VIII, pp. 38-57, Chapter X, pp. 65-71)

9/25: “Can’t Get No Satisfaction: Religion, Guilt, and the Price of Civilization”

Required Reading:

Civilization and its Discontents – Sigmund Freud (Abridged PDF) II-IV

9/27:

Required Reading:

Civilization and its Discontents – Sigmund Freud (Abridged PDF V-IV)
Selections from “The Impact of Women’s Studies on Psychology of Religion: Feminist Critique, Gender Analysis, and the Inclusion of Women” – Diane Jonte-Pace (PDF)

Week 5

9/30: “Nothing Comes from Nothing: Cosmogonic and Social Significance of Vedic Sacrifice”

Required Reading:

“Hinduism By Any Other Name” – Wendy Doniger (PDF)
Purusha Suktam (PDF)
Laws of Manu (PDF, Chapter 1)

In-class video: *Altar of Fire* (45 min):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RYvkYk7GvJ0>

10/2: “My Kingdom for a Horse: Metaphysical Speculations on Vedic Sacrifice”

Required Reading:

The Upanishads –trans. by Patrick Olivelle.

Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad Chapter 1.1-2; 1.4; Chapter 3.1-9; Chapter 4.4-5

10/4: “What am I and Where am I Going?: Selfhood, Suffering, and Ultimate Reality”

Required Reading:

The Upanishads, Olivelle

Chandogya Upaniṣad, Chapter 3.1-19; Chapter 5.1-24; Chapter 6.1-16; Chapter 8.5, 7, 10-12.

Week 6

10/7:

NO CLASS: Research Day for Group Projects

10/9:

NO CLASS: Yom Kippur

10/11: “Ritual/Habitual: Ethical and Theistic Turns in the Interpretation of Vedic Sacrifice”

Required Reading:

The Upanishads, Olivelle

Katha Upaniṣad, Chapter 1-4; 6;

Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad Chapter 1-6

Week 7

10/14: “Paradoxes of *Dharma*: The Central Problems of the *Bhagavad Gita*”

Required Reading:

The Bhagavad Gita –trans. by Barbara Stoler Miller

Introduction (pp1-14)

Teaching 1 (pp 23-29)

10/16: “Selfhood, Knowledge, and Action”

Required Reading:

The Bhagavad Gita

Teachings 2-5 (pp 31-63)

10/18: “No Fruit for Me, Thanks: Action, Non-Action, and Discipline”

Required Reading:

The Bhagavad Gita

Teachings 6-11 (pp 59-108)

Week 8

10/21: “The Theistic Solution: *Bhakti*”

Required Reading:

The Bhagavad Gita

Teachings 11-12, 17-18 (pp 96-112, 131-146)

10/23:

Assignment Due:

Presentation Prospectus Colloquium

10/25:

Study Day (No Class)

Week 9

10/28:

Midterm Examination

10/30: “Back to Square One: Mircea Eliade’s Phenomenology of Religion”

Required Reading:

“An Introduction to Mircea Eliade”

<https://norse-mythology.org/introduction-mircea-eliade/>

The Myth of the Eternal Return, Mircea Eliade (Foreward ix-xi)

11/1:

Required Reading:

The Myth of the Eternal Return –Mircea Eliade (Chapter 1, pp1-27; 34-36, 44-48)

Week 10

11/4:

Required Reading:

The Myth of the Eternal Return –Mircea Eliade (Chapter 2, pp. 51-62; 73-92 (30)

11/6:

Required Reading:

The Myth of the Eternal Return –Mircea Eliade (Chapter 3 pp 95-112, Chapter 4 pp141-143; 147-154; 159-162.)

Recommended Reading:

“Eliade and the Feminist Paradigm Shift” – Carol P. Christ (PDF)

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/25002156.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A7382536974c42bb491c81ec92b5bd6f8>

11/8: “Feeling Moody: Clifford Geertz and the Interpretation of Religion as Cultural System”

Required Reading:

“Religion as a Cultural System” from *Interpretation of Cultures* –Clifford Geertz (Sections II-III)

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/dd6e/d1c6b415f2300afb4b711202042d28cdbdc.pdf>

Week 11

11/11: “You Say You Want a (Neolithic) Revolution: Urban Mesopotamia and the Prehistory of Judaism”

Required Reading:

Enuma Elish (PDF)

Atra-Hasis (PDF)

Code of Hammurabi (PDF)

11/13: “101 Ways to Seal A Covenant: The Roots of Judaism”

Required Reading:

“Judaism” – Stephen Prothero (PDF)

New Oxford Annotated Study Bible, NRSV, 5th Edition

Genesis 1-3; 6-9; 17; 21-22

Exodus 20

1 Kings 6, 8, New Oxford Annotated Study Bible

11/15: “Burning Down the House: The Fall of the First Temple and the Origins of Messianism”

Required Reading:

New Oxford Annotated Study Bible, NRSV, 5th Edition

2 Kings 25, New Oxford Annotated Study Bible

Lamentations 1-5
Isaiah 1, 9, 11, 13

Week 12

11/18: “Home Sweet Home: Second Temple Judaism”

Required Reading:

New Oxford Annotated Study Bible, NRSV, 5th Edition
Ezra 1, 3
1 Maccabees 1, 2, 3:1-9, 42-60; 4

11/20: “A Little Tip About Law: Paul’s Polemic Against Circumcision”

Required Reading:

“Jesus: The God-Man” – Linda Woodhead (PDF)
New Oxford Annotated Study Bible, NRSV, 5th Edition
Paul’s Letter to the Galatians

11/22: “All the (Good) News That’s Fit to Print: A Comparison of Central Episodes of the Gospels”

Required Reading:

New Oxford Annotated Study Bible, NRSV, 5th Edition
Mark 1, 11, 13:1,-2, 14-16
Matthew 1-7, 21:1-27; 22: 21-40, 24:1-2, 26-28

Week 13

11/25:

No class: Research Day for Group Projects

Online Submission of Group Presentation Outline Due 5:00pm EST (via email)

11/27: **No Class (Thanksgiving Break)**

***Assignment Due: Individual Writing Assignment 2: “Redefining Religion”**

11/29: **No Class (Thanksgiving Break)**

Week 14

12/2: “New Kids on the Block?: Central Issues in Theorizing ‘New Religious Movements’”

Required Reading:

Cults and New Religions: A Brief History, Douglas E. Cowan and David G. Bromley, (Chapter 1 pp 1-17)

12/4:

Required Reading:

Cults and New Religions: A Brief History, (TBD)
NRM Documentary Sources (TBD)

12/6:

Required Reading:

Cults and New Religions: A Brief History, (TBD)
NRM Documentary Sources (TBD)

Week 15

12/9:

In-Class Presentation Preparation

12/11:

Group Presentations

12/12-15:

Study Days

12/16

Final Examination, 12:30-3:30pm